Helicopters - the new black?

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Hurricane Katrina managed to knock the Indian Ocean tsunami off the front pages with an ongoing barrage of misery for residents of the gulf states (the cities of New Orleans and Biloxi in particular). This was a little different to the December tsunami, although it was a mammoth surge wave it was associated with an intense storm and it affected the richest and best prepared nation on earth! The US has, on the face of it, led the way in disaster preparedness since 9.11 but quite aside from general EMS expenditure (or lack of!) two other areas of rescue that haven't seen the same level of spending as structural collapse and counter-terrorism are Flood Defence and the Coastguard. As well prepared as the US Coastguard is, it needed considerably more helicopters and crews than it had available to adequately deal with this disaster. Not least because it was for some time the only evidence that *any* rescue response by authorities was actually in progress! By the third day over 4000 water 'rescues' had been undertaken.

Once again it is the storm and water oriented disaster that needed to be addressed and will continue to require the lions share of world rescue/disaster preparedness resources NOT collapsed buildings! There has been MUCH feathering of nests since 911 but over the past year or two most government departments and relevant agencies have sort-of got the message and started redirecting resources into water rescue. But what kind of water rescue? FEMA have taken it to mean limited water awareness training which is better than nothing but this is really the level that ALL emergency services personnel should be at. Specialists in disaster response as orchestrated by FEMA should be ahead of the game but Katrina brought into stark contrast the difference between a requirement for a USAR Task Force even with technical swiftwater rescue capability (invariably a very brief and small-scale phase) and the much longer-lived and broader impact of the flood phase. True Swiftwater specialists at the most technical

level should constitute but a handful of the available personnel and though immensely useful at any water rescue incident their specific aptitude for swiftwater as defined by a flash flood for instance isn't the most applicable to turning up late in the day at a large scale flood. A parallel would be to expect a small special forces detachment to fight a set-piece battle instead of a division of regular infantry soldiers. There's a time and a place for such specialists but in a large scale incident there's only so much they can do. Mass casualty evacuation and post-incident relief in the form of food, water, shelter and medical aid still needs to be better addressed by most world agencies. Jim Segerstrom may be magnanimous enough *not* to say 'I told you so... AGAIN' but his swiftwater courses speak for themselves in providing a strong element of flood rescue because he has long been one of a lone band of voices in the wilderness predicting these events and detailing what aquatic training should ACTUALLY consist of.

Many think they are prepared or making adequate provision but take a long hard look at Katrina and how quickly it 'swamped' the US's immense resources. How much of that was a FEMA management problem we'll wait to see but take a look also at the Boscastle incident in Cornwall England in 2004 and at the way such a small-scale incident (in Katrina and Tsunami terms) affecting a very small holiday village with a miniscule population sapped virtually all of the UKs available rescue helicopters. All agree that helicopters were the most useful resource at Boscastle. Expand that to a New Orleans scale incident (or London!) and it's clear that if we have to have millions of dollars of equipment sat in storage waiting for a once in a blue moon incident then perhaps it should be a few more helicopters and trained crews? If you're going to compare lives saved with expenditure they'll more than earn their keep in a general medical-rescue role when there are no disasters!

We are never going to get a large scale incident that will require more than a handful of rope rescuers or confined space rescuers or structural collapse specialists on the ground assisting the local crews but WE ARE going to have incidents that will require across the board medical response and water rescue . The majority of 'rescues' we have seen in New Orleans should more correctly be described as 'urgent evacuations'. That's very different to specialist rescue. A few have accused us of an anti-USAR bias in the wake of 9.11. But knowing full well that it is already far too late to stop that particular ill-conceived juggernaut our point wasn't that USAR was an unecessary area of expansion (because there WILL be occasional catestrophic collapses) but it's the SCALE of expenditure that does not fit the requirement. We predicted just after 9.11 that five years later we'd see a ratio of *cost:lives-saved* numbering tens of millions of dollars/pounds. In fact it's been far , far higher than that and if London experienced a New Orleans (and it could!) all the buidling shoring, concrete cutting resources in the world will be no use at all.

Our colleagues in the medical services and the coastguard must look at USAR expenditure and wonder how many lives they could save EVERY SINGLE DAY with that money.

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